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ABSTRACT

This fact sheet on English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) instruction provides brief explanations of the following: the meaning of the terms ESL and ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages); student motivation for taking ESL classes; how long it takes to learn English; ESL adult enrollment rates; ESL program design options; general methods and approach used for ESL instruction; the teacher's language competency needs; some current salient issues in ESL instruction; and how to obtain more information about the field. (MSE) (MSE) (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse on Literacy Education)

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Technical Assistance for
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ESL Fact Sheet

By Miriam Burt
Center for Applied Linguistics

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What does ESL mean?
ESL refers to English as a second language. It is also known as English for speakers of other languages or ESOL. ESL Instruction is an important part of the adult literacy system in the United States.

Why Do Adults Take ESL Classes?
Adults take ESL classes to learn to speak, understand, read and write English. Some reasons they want to improve their language skills are to get jobs or get promoted in the jobs they have, to help children with schoolwork, to communicate with neighbors and colleagues, and to participate more fully in U.S. society. Most adult ESL learners are immigrants who are learning English and learning about U.S. culture at the same time.

How Long Does It Take to Learn English?
The length of time to learn the language depends on such factors as the individual's age, educational background, level of literacy in the native language, and what opportunities they have to interact with native English speakers. However, for most foreign-born adults, it takes up to two years to progress beyond basic survival English and five to seven years to understand and speak English well.

How Many Adults are Enrolled In ESL Classes?
According to the U.S. Department of Education, 1.2 million adults enrolled in federally funded ESL instruction in 1994. Every year, many more are tutored by volunteers in churches, schools, and libraries. Others, eager to learn English, may have to wait for months or years to get into ESL classes. In large cities across the country, ESL programs frequently have waiting lists for classroom space. Some rural areas have no available classes.

What Kinds of ESL Programs are there?

ESL programs vary in scope and content. Some programs, especially those for recent arrivals including refugees, emphasize survival or life skills in the curriculum and focus on improving listening and speaking abilities (oral proficiency). Others stress vocational or work-related topics, citizenship and civics education, family literacy, or academic or GED preparation. Learners who lack literacy skills in their native language or are new to the Roman alphabet may be placed in classes that focus on developing basic literacy skills. Classes are provided by local educational agencies, community colleges, local businesses and unions, community based organizations, volunteer groups, churches, and for-profit language schools.

What Approaches and Methods are Used to Teach English?

ESL teachers use a variety of approaches to teach adult learners to speak, read, and write English. Some approaches focus on teaching the grammar rules of the language, other focus on the language functions such as asking for assistance and expressing likes and dislikes, still
others focus on competencies. Competencies are the knowledge and skills needed to function in the U.S. such as giving and following directions on the job. Some approaches are participatory in that they focus on discussing and writing about issues in the learners' lives.

Do I Need to Speak the Native Language of the Learners to Teach Them English?

You do not need to speak the native languages of your students although familiarity with other languages and cultures can be useful.

What are Some Current "Hot Issues" in Adult ESL Instruction?

Issues facing the field of adult ESL include the shortage of classes, the need for more resources and for research about effective techniques to improve practice, and the need to develop better ways to measure the progress of ESL learners. The majority of teaching jobs in adult ESL are
part-time and lack benefits. Staff development opportunities vary considerably from program to program. It is a demanding and creative field that should grow as the demand for English language instruction continues.

How Can I Learn More about Teaching ESL to Adults?

For free resources about teaching English as a second language to adults, contact the National Clearinghouse for ESL Literacy Education (NCLE). Established by Congress in 1988, and funded by ERIC, the Educational Resources Information Center, a program of the U.S. Department of Education. NCLE is the only national resource center with a special focus on the literacy education of adults learning English. Its publications and information services help teachers, tutors, and others interested in ESL. Visit NCLE's webpage to download free ERIC Digests on teaching ESL.

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